

Using WhatsApp Status as a Tool for Promoting Politics among Youngsters in Kerala

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Abstract

WhatsApp is widely regarded as one of the most engaging social media platforms worldwide. As of June 2021, there were 487.5 million registered WhatsApp users in India (Statista, 2021). In recent times, the relevance and impact of WhatsApp in shaping political discourse and mobilising public opinion have become increasingly evident. Its status feature, originally intended for casual sharing, has evolved into a powerful tool that influences social and political interactions. In Kerala, where political awareness is strong among youth, WhatsApp status is widely used to express political ideologies. The study examined the use of WhatsApp status updates to promote politics among young people in Kerala. It is conducted through qualitative and quantitative analyses among WhatsApp users aged 18-25. A total of 120 respondents voluntarily participated in the study, and data were collected through online and offline questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The results of this study clearly highlight the significance of the WhatsApp status feature in promoting political discourse or responding to specific political conflicts in Kerala. The analysis indicates that WhatsApp status serves as a tool for micro-targeted campaigning, peer-to-peer influence, and rapid narrative construction. However, it also raises concerns about misinformation and the merging of personal expression with political propaganda.

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Keywords

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Introduction

Since the beginnings of cultural civilisation, humans have had a strong urge to develop tools and technologies to extend the limits of the communicative space. It always enchanted humans, leading our ancestors to make life easier. Revolutions and technological advancements have paved the way for a more efficient way of living. It was the story of ice and fire, the story of wheels, the printing press, telegraphs, the telephone, television, the internet, social media, and now we are heading towards a world led by AI. When we consider the progression of these communication spaces, from the press to AI, some points are obvious: what drives this development? Why did people begin to read newspapers? Why do people spend their valuable time in front of the television? Why do people text on mobile phones even when we have a lot of other things to do in our day-to-day life?

The primary reasons people are exposed to media are for information, entertainment, or both. Traditionally, content producers (sources) for media were very limited in number and constituted the majority of the audience (consumers) for that content. There is a clear power imbalance in knowledge production and distribution. Here, knowledge is power; those who controlled the media enjoyed control over the masses, regardless of social and cultural circumstances. Mass media, whatever its form, influence what political actors think and care about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, the pattern of these influences is highly complex in different normative discourses. The question of whether the media agenda shapes the political agenda, or vice versa, and under what conditions (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), remains debated in academic and communication circles. This is why nations such as the US and the USSR hosted mass media researchers during wartime and the Cold War era. Given the media's role in information mediation, until the emergence and development of social media, audiences largely lacked the means to express their political or social viewpoints to the world.

Users typically access social media services via web-based interfaces on desktops and laptops, or by installing apps that provide social media functionality on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. As users engage with these platforms, they create dynamic, interactive spaces where individuals, communities, and organisations can share, co-create, discuss, and modify both user-generated and pre-made content. Defining social media solely by its ability to connect people has been criticised as too broad, as it would encompass fundamentally different technologies, such as the telegraph and telephone, under the same label.

The emergence of new 'hybrid media systems', which include both vertical and horizontal communication by the internet and social media, has changed conventional understandings in media studies, policy studies, and political communication (Wolfe et al., 2013) and increased the number of actors who may be able to influence political discourse and agenda (Chadwick, 2017). While social media facilitates information sharing between the public and parties, traditional media continue to serve as gatekeepers (Gilardi et al., 2021). Gatekeepers play an important role in the production of content in traditional media. It can be their reporters, editors, managers, or those who own that media as well. Rather, social media is acknowledged for its democratic participation, personal expression, and freedom from gatekeeping or external controls. If a person needs to write or express something on their social media accounts, they can do so without any controls, but within the boundaries set by established legal frameworks. However, the recent studies suggest that social media is not free of gatekeepers either.

Due to fundamental differences in the structure and operation of social media and traditional media, what we know from the latter cannot be directly applied to social media. Therefore, it is unclear who the gatekeepers are on social media, how to identify them, and most importantly, how they affect the production and dissemination of news content (Li et al., 2022). When we look into the politics and political participations in the social media era, some scholars argue that a growing number of people, especially the younger generation, reject traditional politics by not voting or participating in political and civic activities, who claim that the democratic representative system has collapsed (Dalton & Weldon, 2007). This has become a global concern as young people become the most influential stakeholders in global demographics. It is also an issue in India, where nearly

968.8 million eligible voters and 215.9 million voters are under 25 (PIB, 2024). It comprises 22.2 per cent of the total electors. Given India's active democracy, it should be a top priority to involve these people in electoral processes. For doing so, it is important to address their concerns, needs, and requirements.

Most scholars concur that wealthier and more educated individuals have greater access to political information, more time, money, and expertise, which leads to increased political activity (Verba et al., 1995). However, this observation raises a problem that requires us to identify the 'Politics'. We have to specify what the politics is. What is the political participation, and more importantly, the political involvement of people who do not fit into these purported frames? Technological advancements, such as social media and the internet, have transformed political ideas and conceptions. People either actively participate in the political process, consume and disseminate political information, or become political enthusiasts through social media. More quickly and easily than ever before, people may express their concerns about public issues and learn more about politics through a variety of outlets. It is fascinating to look at political participation in this context and see if the so-called 'Kerala model of development' (Parayil, 2000), which was praised for advancements in human development (Dreze & Sen, 1995), has led to declining political engagement like other democracies or if it has evolved into a unique Kerala model.

Kerala has undergone a massive social upheaval, unlike any other state in India. Because of the strong communist influence on the state, which dates back to the late nineteenth-century anti-caste and religious reform movements, Kerala's social and political climate was ripe for a new, revitalising spirit of renaissance (Kumar, 2017). According to recent political studies of Kerala, communist sentiment gave the impoverished majority a sense of dignity. It heightened their political consciousness to the point that they believed they would never succumb to persecution (Ratcliffe, 1978). The people in the state who receive higher education become more politically conscious, thereby increasing their political participation (Dalton, 2013).

This study analyses the use of WhatsApp status as a tool for promoting politics among young people in Kerala. The focus is on young people aged 18 to 25 who use WhatsApp for political communication. As of May 2024, there are 535.8 million WhatsApp users in India, the largest number in a country in the world

(WhatsApp Users by Country 2024, n.d.). Because of its popularity and low cost, WhatsApp is one of the most effective platforms for sharing messages with large numbers of people, particularly among peers. The defining feature of WhatsApp is that users can engage in 'horizontal communication' or interpersonal communication (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). The experiment is conducted in the context of the 2024 parliamentary election. 85 per cent of the respondents were affiliated with a political party or following it. 64.2 per cent of the respondents were members of at least one group of a political party or its organisations and unions.

Review of Literature

Wolfe, Jones & Baumgartner (2013) analyse media and policy studies of agenda setting. They discuss the disconnection between media agenda-setting and policy agenda-setting, highlighting how media coverage does not always translate into policy action or public concern. The article builds on existing theories of agenda-setting, including the works of McCombs and Shaw (1972), who established the foundational principles of media influence on public perception. The findings suggest that understanding the dynamics of agenda-setting can improve both media practices and policy-making processes. It calls for further research into the mechanisms that bridge or widen the gap between media and policy agendas. The study emphasises the importance of effective communication strategies in the media and policy sectors to ensure that public concerns are adequately addressed. The authors also propose that future studies examine how digital media shape agendas and how social media affects public discourse.

In their discussion of the relationship between political agenda-setting and the media, Walgrave & Aelst (2006) point out that this relationship is complex and influenced by multiple variables. This is contingent upon several conditions, including the type of issues covered, the specific media outlet, the nature of coverage, the political context variables, and the output variables. By emphasising the necessity of a comprehensive approach that accounts for multiple factors, this study advances our understanding of how the media shapes political agendas. They recommend creating an all-encompassing theory of media's ability to shape political agendas while accounting for the complexities and contingencies involved.

The book titled 'The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power' by Andrew Chadwick (2013) introduces the concept of a hybrid media system, where traditional and new media logics coexist and interact. This structure affects power relations and changes political communication. He examines a range of political phenomena, including WikiLeaks, live political debates, political scandals, American presidential campaigns, and the roles of journalists, bloggers, and activists. He offers a thorough framework for examining how various media interact and affect political power dynamics. Chadwick also addresses the challenges posed by the widespread use of social media and digital technologies, as well as the blurriness of the lines between producers and consumers of political information.

According to Chen, Lee, and Marble (2018), the internet has made it easier than ever for people to express their opinions to their elected officials. Drawing on the theory of expensive signalling, they argue that constituents who write to officials via online channels are less interested in officials' concerns than those who speak with them face-to-face. To investigate this possibility, they conducted a nationwide survey of U.S. state legislators to assess their receptivity to various constituent messages. They find that policymakers perceive social media messages as significantly less powerful and meaningful than the same messages delivered in person, even though social media facilitates faster, easier communication. They propose that constituents can more effectively plan their outreach efforts by having a better knowledge of these dynamics.

King, Schneer, and White (2017) note that news media have a significant impact on national agendas and public discourse. According to their research, news-related social media posts increased by approximately 20% on the first day of publication and significantly improved public discourse on certain subjects, promoting greater inclusivity. The media sets the public agenda by focusing on certain aspects of a story (framing) and by giving greater attention to some issues than others. News consumption and distribution have changed as social media has become more popular. Now, news can spread quickly, sparking intense public interest and debate. It is essential for democratic procedures. They contend that stakeholders can more effectively navigate the intricate interplay among the media, public opinion, and democratic participation by recognising these evolving dynamics.

The paper 'Flows of Information in Election Campaigns: Who Influences Whom?' by James et al. (2019) suggests that the emergence of social media has introduced new dynamics that could alter the traditional gatekeeping role of media outlets by enabling direct communication between political parties and the general public. They contend that while social media allows the public and parties to disseminate information independently, traditional media remains essential for mediating these exchanges and shaping narratives. Depending on the issues at hand, social media's ability to shape the news agenda varies. Campaigns may improve voter engagement and maximise outreach by developing a solid understanding of information flows. However, social media's growth has also raised concerns about misinformation and disinformation, which can significantly affect public opinion and electoral outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on the theory of agenda-setting, which describes how some issues garner more political attention than others. As a communication tool, social media not only adds a layer of complexity to agenda-setting dynamics but can also change their nature (Gilardi et al., 2021). It creates new challenges and opportunities for political agenda-setting. Social media is used by lawmakers, candidates, and their affiliates to interact with the public and the media (Barberá & Zeitzoff, 2017), as well as to interact with (or even criticise) their rivals (Russell, 2018). Therefore, social media platforms such as WhatsApp are an ideal tool for politicians and the public to construct their own profiles and demonstrate competence in particular topics of strong interest (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Compared with news cycles as conventionally defined, it has produced political information cycles that may involve larger numbers and a more diverse spectrum of actors and interactions (Chadwick, 2011). These 'hybrid media systems' (Chadwick, Citation 2017) have increased the number and kinds of actors who can "introduce, amplify, and maintain topics, frames, and speakers that come to dominate political discourse" (Jungherr et al., 2019). Social media has diminished the gatekeeping power of traditional media.

Research Objectives

The connection between social media, youth, and political activism is multifaceted and complicated. Based on analysing the existing literature, this study focuses on four objectives:

1. Understanding the WhatsApp status as a tool for political communication.
2. Identifying the engagement of youth in nonconventional political activism using new media technologies.
3. Analysis of the agenda-setting theories of communication in the context of social media.
4. Evaluating the gatekeeping and framing role of conventional media in the digital era.

Research Method

This study will utilise a qualitative research design to provide an in-depth understanding of how young people in Kerala use WhatsApp status updates for political promotion. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it facilitates the exploration of meanings, motivations, and practices within natural contexts. Given WhatsApp's privacy and encryption, a multi-method strategy integrating digital observation and in-depth interviews will be implemented to achieve a comprehensive analysis.

The research will be conducted in two interconnected phases:

- **Non-Participant Observation of WhatsApp Statuses:** This phase involves the systematic observation and documentation of political content shared via WhatsApp status updates.
- **In-depth Personal Interactions (Interviews):** This phase involves semi-structured interviews with a subset of the observed participants to understand their motivations, intentions, and perceptions regarding their online political behaviour.

Participants will be selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure they meet the study's specific criteria.

Criteria for Inclusion:

- Youngsters (defined as individuals aged 18-30) residing in Kerala.
- Active WhatsApp users who post status updates.

Potential participants will be identified through the researchers' professional networks, provided they meet the inclusion criteria. Additionally, a snowball sampling technique will be employed, whereby initial participants recommend other eligible individuals. The sample size for the observation phase will be determined by data saturation, with 120 participants to ensure a comprehensive dataset. From this cohort, 25 participants were purposively selected for the interview phase to capture a range of political perspectives and posting behaviours.

Prior to the commencement of observation, potential participants were approached, the purpose of the study explained, and informed consent obtained. This consent will explicitly include permission for the researcher to add participants as WhatsApp contacts exclusively for the purpose of observing their status updates during the study period. The voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time will be clearly communicated.

The observation period is scheduled from 15 March 2024 to 15 April 2024, coinciding with the 18th Lok Sabha election campaign in Kerala. This timeframe enables the systematic examination of political discourse within a single political event, capturing both routine expressions and responses to emerging political developments. To maintain a non-participant observer stance, the researcher will refrain from interacting with, liking, or replying to any status updates.

Following the observation period, in-depth interviews will be conducted to explore the 'why' behind the 'what' observed in Phase 1. A semi-structured interview guide will be developed based on the initial findings from the observation phase. This ensures that the interviews are focused yet flexible enough to allow for unexpected themes to emerge. The interviews will explore the motivations to choose to post political content on their WhatsApp status. Is it for self-expression, to inform their network, to provoke discussion, or to project a particular identity?

Key interview questions will explore the sources of shared content, whether participants create original material or forward content from other groups, and the factors influencing their decisions to share specific pieces. Additional questions will address anticipated or actual responses from their networks, perceptions of how their status influences their contacts' political opinions, and their understanding of their audience. The interviews will also examine how participants navigate the tension between the intimate and public-by-default nature of the status feature, particularly when addressing divisive topics. Interviews will be conducted in the participant's preferred language (Malayalam or English) to ensure comfort and depth of expression. Each interview is expected to last 30-45 minutes and may be conducted in person or via a secure video call, at the participant's preference.

Data from both phases will be analysed using Thematic Analysis. Status update logs will be coded to identify recurring themes, content types, and discursive strategies present in the updates. Audio recordings will be transcribed verbatim and translated into English when necessary. Transcripts will be reviewed multiple times to ensure thorough familiarisation. Initial codes will be generated and subsequently grouped into overarching themes that reflect key patterns in participants' experiences and motivations. In the final stage, findings from both phases will be triangulated. Themes identified in the interviews will be used to explain and contextualise patterns observed in the status updates, thereby providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

The study will comply with the highest ethical standards for internet-based research, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, and maintaining data security. This rigorous and ethically grounded methodology facilitates an in-depth examination of contemporary political communication practices, offering valuable insights into political communication, new media studies, and youth studies in the context of Kerala and India.

Results and Analysis

WhatsApp is an instant messaging platform owned by US-based tech firm Meta Platforms Inc., which also owns social media services like Facebook and Instagram. Since its 2009 release, it has rapidly emerged as the most popular communications

platform in the Global South. The Facebook (now Meta Inc.) purchase of WhatsApp in 2014 for \$19 billion is one of the largest tech acquisitions in history. After this acquisition, WhatsApp has shifted from a one-to-one communications application to a broader 'platform ecosystem' that enables a range of activities among a diverse set of users. WhatsApp was not intended for political discourse or news dissemination (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018); these are actions encouraged by users inside the unique emotional and personal digital connection that the network provides. As a for-profit company, even if it makes it easier for its users to engage, WhatsApp positions itself as a facilitator to profit from these interactions.

With 500 million, India has more WhatsApp users than any other democratic country in the world. People use this platform to express their feelings, interests, and personal beliefs, to learn, work, and participate in political and cultural activities. WhatsApp links users in private digital places through trustworthy networks. Influenced political discourse and political imaginations across, from tea stall discussions to ministerial debates. Political parties have played a crucial role in mobilising platforms for communication with the general public and prospective voters, in addition to organising within the political arena.

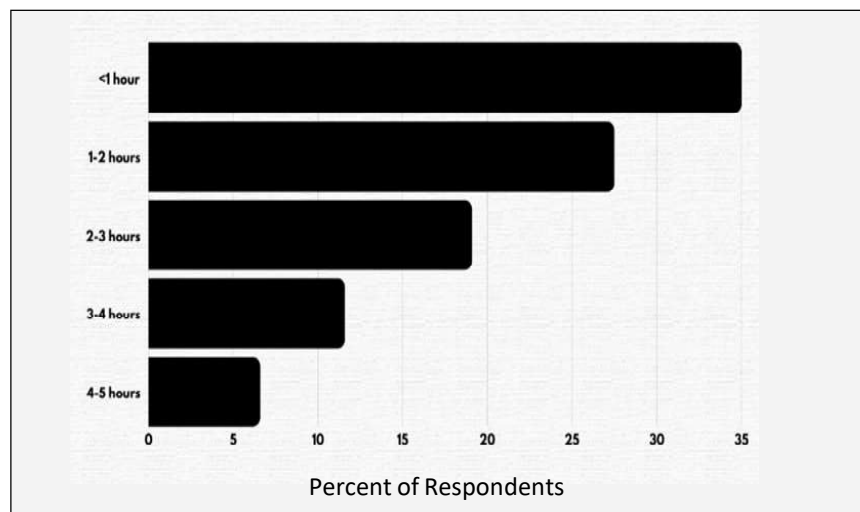
It allows everyone to voice their political opinions, disagree with others, engage in contentious discussions about many topics, and more. It is nearly identical to those we have done offline. However, WhatsApp is not subject to time or space constraints. We can communicate with anyone who also has a WhatsApp account, from anywhere at anytime. With 500 million users of WhatsApp, this means a huge number of people in India are exchanging messages in real time every day. Users feel safer and are less susceptible to social sanctions in WhatsApp, which is a comparatively private and regulated discussion environment.

The mass-mediated picture of the social world, in the form of news, comments, pictures, videos, memes, posts, etc., provides the 'raw material' for political discussion with family, friends, or acquaintances (Mondak, 2010). Those who discuss political matters in online spaces typically exhibit higher levels of political interest, knowledge, efficacy, and cognitive elaboration, all of which affect their degree of political engagement (Eveland, 2004; Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005). Social media-based political interactions may also foster civic and political engagement, both directly and through a 'spillover effect' (Chan, 2022).

Social and political activists are using social media communication tools like WhatsApp in ways beyond simple information sharing. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), digital media and internet-based applications are evolving into organisational structures of collective political action that both supplement and occasionally replace the function of traditional, 'brick and mortar' organisations, such as trade unions, political parties, or non-governmental organisations. In these cases, the communication network becomes the organisational form of the political action. Younger age cohorts, who are the offspring of post-industrial democracies and are distinguished by greater degrees of individualism and disenchantment with political organisations, find these connective action networks especially appealing (Inglehart, 1997).

A total of 120 WhatsApp users were included in this study. 72 were male, and 48 were female. Among the surveyed individuals, 33 (27.5%) reported using WhatsApp for 1-2 hours per day. This was followed by 23 of the respondents (19.1%) who stated they use WhatsApp for 2-3 hours a day. As many as 14 (11.6%) and 8 (6.6%) respondents reported using WhatsApp for 3-4 hours and 4-5 hours, respectively. No respondents in this study used WhatsApp for more than 5 hours a day. There were also 42 participants (35%) who used WhatsApp for less than one hour every day.

Figure 1: Hours Spend on Whatsapp in a Day



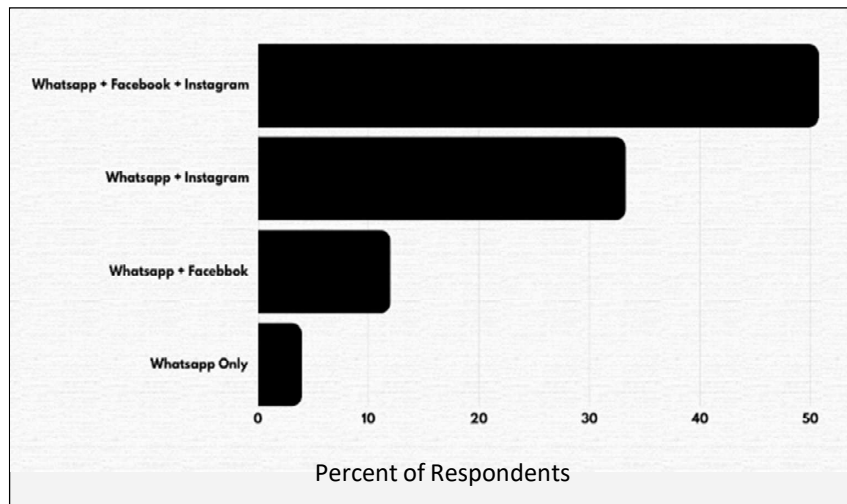
Even though WhatsApp remains one of the most widely used messaging apps worldwide, several factors are leading some user segments to spend less time on the app. In this study, we can see that more than 60 per cent of the respondents use WhatsApp for less than 2 hours a day. Designing better user experiences and meeting the demands of various user groups can be made easier with an understanding of these dynamics.

The major reasons for this declination are;

- User Fatigue - Constant messages and the need to be connected overwhelm many users, which eventually causes them to spend less time on WhatsApp.
- Privacy Concerns - Users may limit their use of the app as a result of increased knowledge of data privacy and security, particularly following updates and policy revisions.
- Alternatives - WhatsApp usage may decrease as a result of users having more options with the emergence of other messaging apps like Instagram, Telegram, Signal, and others.
- Changing Social Dynamics - Spending time on WhatsApp may decrease as a result of changes in communication styles, such as a preference for in-person contacts or alternative social media platforms.
- Mental Health Awareness - Some users are deliberately cutting back on their screen time and social media use, including WhatsApp, as a result of the increased attention being paid to mental health.
- Age Demographics - While elderly participants may continue to use WhatsApp, which is a comparatively older social media platform with less attractive and limited tools, younger groups may favour emerging platforms.
- Feature Saturation - The novelty of the platform may fade after users have grasped its functions, which could result in less frequent use.
- Post-Pandemic Behavioural Changes - App usage increased during the COVID-19 outbreak, but when things settle down, some users might start using them less frequently.

Meanwhile, only 5 respondents (4.2%) use WhatsApp as their only social media platform. However, 14 (11.7%) use WhatsApp and Facebook, and 40 (33.3%) use WhatsApp and Instagram. A whopping 61 respondents (50.8) said they use WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram as well.

Figure 2: Social Media Platforms Used by Respondents



It's very evident in this data, that people use multiple social media platforms for a variety of reasons, reflecting their diverse needs and preferences.

Here are some key factors:

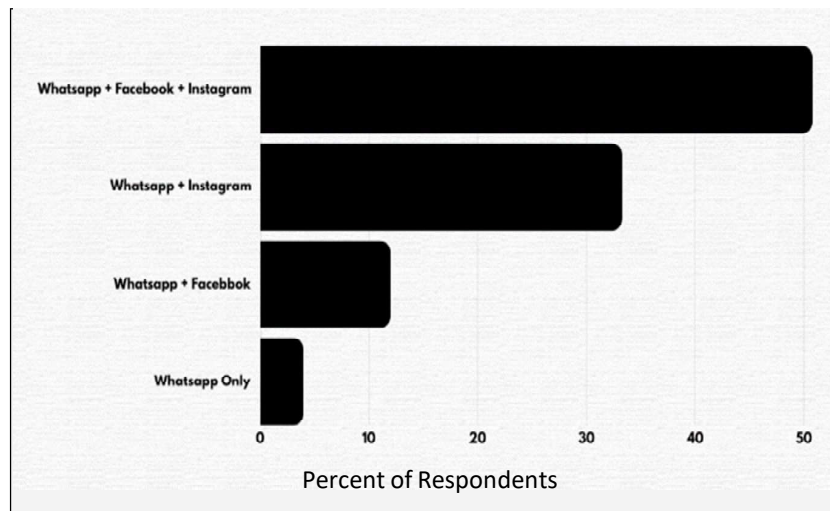
- Specialisation - Different social media platforms serve unique functions (e.g., Instagram for visual content, LinkedIn for professional networking, Twitter for real-time news and opinions).
- Content Variety - Users frequently look for various types of material, including discussions, articles, videos, and photos.
- Targeted Communities - People can interact with particular communities or interest groups through the many platforms that draw in diverse user demographics.

- Engagement Styles - While some users like Instagram's more visual material or Facebook's longer-form content, others prefer the instantaneity of WhatsApp or Twitter and other services.
- Privacy and Anonymity - Platforms may be selected by users according to the degree of anonymity or privacy they prefer. For example, they may use one platform for more private or anonymous interactions and another for intimate ties.
- Cross-Promotion and Connectivity- To cross-promote their material or maintain relationships with various friend groups, family, and professional networks, users use numerous platforms.
- Content Creation and Sharing - In order to reach a larger audience and take advantage of various features, creators frequently use numerous platforms (such as Facebook Live streaming or Instagram Stories).
- Trends and Novelty - Trends or suggestions may entice users to new platforms in an effort to keep up with pop culture and social media innovations.
- FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) - To make sure they don't miss out on trends, events or discussions occurring elsewhere, people frequently sign up for several platforms.
- Personalisation - Users can create a more individualised online profile by customising their social media experience to fit their interests and preferences.
- Professional vs. Personal Use - In order to compartmentalise their online identities, many people use distinct accounts for personal use (like Facebook or Instagram) and professional networking (like LinkedIn).
- Social Validation and Influence - In order to increase their exposure and impact, users may be driven to interact on several platforms by the desire for social validation, such as likes and comments.

Among the respondents of this study, 22 of them (18.3%) said they exchanged 1–25 messages a day. 39(32.5%) said they exchange 25-50 messages a day; 35

(29.2%) exchange 50-100 messages; 16 (13.3%) exchange 100-200 messages; and 8 (6.7%) send and receive more than 200 messages a day.

Figure 3: Social Media Platforms Used by Respondents

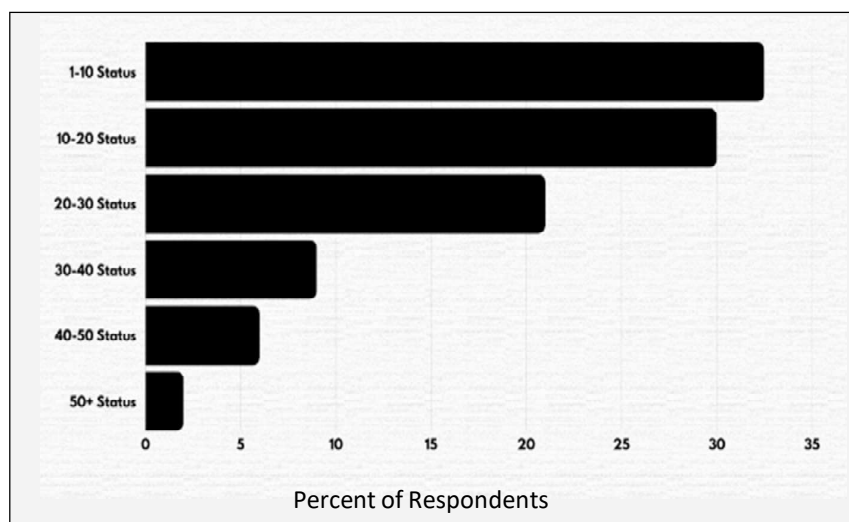


Despite its widespread use, many users are less active on WhatsApp than they once were. There are several reasons behind this lack of activity among WhatsApp users. One of the primary reasons is the rise of alternative messaging platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. These platforms offer more options for video and photo sharing, entertainment, and pop culture creation. The proliferation of social media platforms is another factor contributing to user inactivity on WhatsApp. With multiple social media apps available, users spread their time and attention across multiple platforms, leading to decreased activity on WhatsApp. A study by Pew Research Centre found that 42% of social media users are engaged on five or more platforms, suggesting a fragmented user base (Jones, 2020). Users' responses to new updates and features on WhatsApp has also been conflicting. WhatsApp needs to innovate, adapt to shifting user preferences, and prioritise user privacy and security to solve this problem.

The researchers monitored the samples' WhatsApp statuses for 1 month. In this observation, each of them was analysed. It is observed that 39 of the 120 (32.5%) put 1-10 status in this period; 36 (30%) put 10-20; 25 (20.8%) had 20-30; 11

(9.1%) had 30-40; 7 (5.8%) had 30-40, and only 2 samples (1.6%) put political statuses more than 50 times in a month.

Figure 4: No. of Political Status put by Participants in a Month



This data might seem evident and should indeed serve as the starting point for any rigorous inquiry into the comprehensive understanding of whether and how exactly citizens utilise private social media like WhatsApp for political communication. From this data, it's very clear that the emergence of new media makes young people more politically aware. They can effortlessly access news and opinions via WhatsApp status. It allows them to participate in political activities in new ways. When almost everyone has the tool, it's easy to share specific information through that tool.

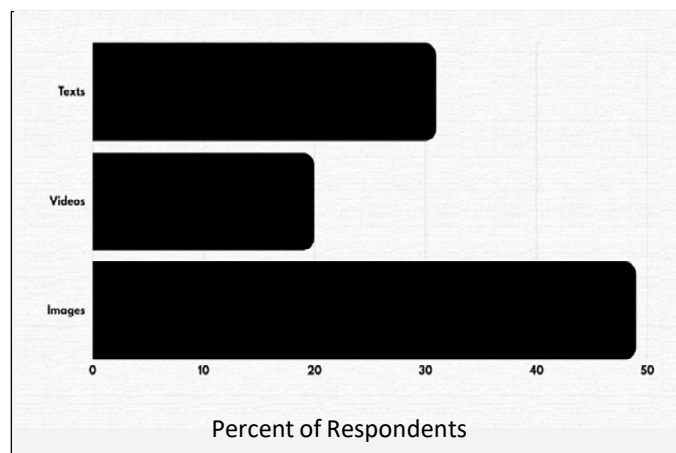
16.6% of the samples share more than 30 status updates per month on average, or one every day. This implies that there may be significant differences in how young people use WhatsApp status for political communication. The user's political background, gender, educational background, emotions, and cultural connotations can all affect these differences. Unlike any other social media platforms, WhatsApp is never fully public. It is utilised among strong-tie networks of family, co-workers and friends (Masip et al., 2021). WhatsApp allows users to share their status only with those who have their contact information. Which

means if 'A' has a status and is seen by 'B', it implies 'A' has the contact of 'B' and vice versa. There are no fake followers here, unlike on Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok. Hence, to a certain extent, what occurs within this platform might have tangible personal implications in real life. Since communication typically occurs between 'trusted ties,' privacy promotes the free flow of messages.

A person has a certain target audience in mind when they post political content on WhatsApp. They can even share it with everyone, only specific contacts, or hide some contacts. This type of segmentation and customisation makes it easier to communicate through channels designed to achieve specific objectives. It permits ongoing communication in a regulated setting for both political and personal engagement (Swart et al., 2018). The hybrid public-interpersonal communication feature of WhatsApp makes it simple to move nearly any kind of political message from the public sphere to private interpersonal communication networks. Attitudes towards information consumption may differ, or acceptance/tolerance norms, if any, may diverge. Similarly, content that is controversial or outrageous has surfaced as a result of WhatsApp's small-group dynamics, which allow it to quickly spread to bigger groups and become more 'public' (Martin, 2024).

A total of 1416 political statuses were observed on WhatsApp over a month from 120 samples. Among these 699 statuses were photos, 277 were videos, and 440 of them were text content.

Figure 5: Types of Whatsapp Status

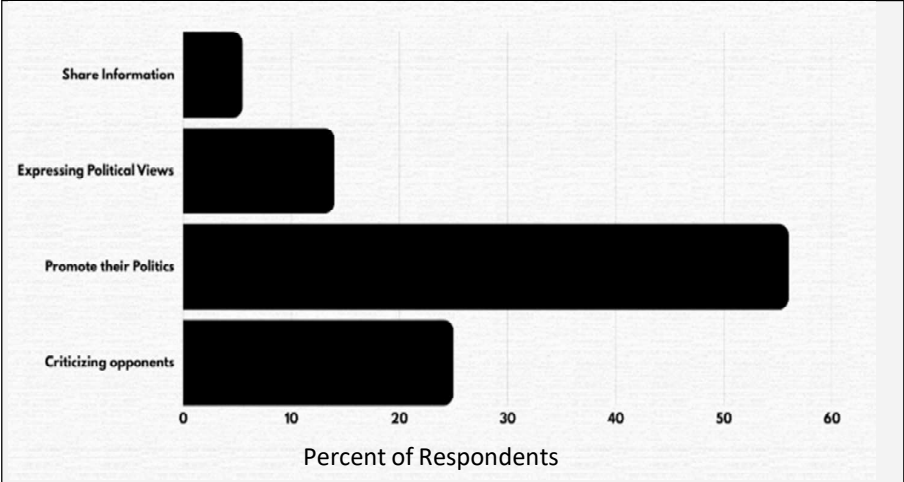


It’s interesting to examine the types of messages people publish on their WhatsApp stories. We can use pictures, videos, or text as status updates in order to create a forum for political discussion. Nonetheless, the vast majority of posts shared by the participants were photographs, such as candidate posters or other events held by their political parties. The popularity of visual communication, the need for authenticity, and the impact of social media algorithms are among the causes of this. However, images are smaller than videos, so sharing them as a WhatsApp status is easier.

Visual material is more likely to engage people than text-based content. Status with images has a higher chance of generating a better return on engagement than text-only submissions. A Buffer study in 2013 found that tweets containing photos get 150% more retweets than those without. The popularity of image-based status has also been influenced by the need for authenticity. Status that includes photographs offers a more genuine, unvarnished look into people’s lives, in a world where social media is sometimes criticised for encouraging manicured lifestyles and unattainable ideals.

When analysing these statuses by political intention, 194 (13.8%) expressed users’ political views on local, national, or international issues. 788 (55.6%) statuses were used to promote their political party or candidate (s). 356 (25.1%) of them were criticising the opposition party or candidate/s. 78 (5.5%) statuses were used to share important information about elections.

Figure 6: Intention of Whatsaspp Status



WhatsApp gives people a space to spread their political beliefs. Since it is not a news source in and of itself, any attempt at discourse regarding public events must be viewed independently of deliberate choices made towards political debate or news intake. Without clear credibility indicators that are essential in interactions with strangers, people are more likely to accept information from intimate acquaintances (Masip et al., 2021). In contrast to other public situations, political information and opinions may be taken for granted as normal and are often questioned by others. In this study, 55.6% of the statuses observed were used to promote their political interests, and the acceptance and analysis of these statuses depend on the personal closeness and ideological affinity between them. These conversations, based on WhatsApp status, can be 'clashing,' which attempts to impose its points of view over others who disagree, or 'heberemian,' in which both parties listen to each other and attempt to understand the other side's arguments. Political movements or parties often form this WhatsApp status campaign centred around specific ideologies or issues.

The influence of ideology among the general public is increased by like-minded people establishing ideological communities on WhatsApp to debate and uphold common views. These groups eventually turn into echo chambers, where participants are largely exposed to political messages that reinforce their opinions, thereby strengthening their convictions. Campaign slogans, policy recommendations, and ideological declarations are examples of these one-way exchanges. It helps reiterate political messages without being sidetracked by discussions or counterarguments.

Direct, one-on-one communication is also made possible by this WhatsApp status. This is helpful for customising messaging for specific people or groups based on their political inclinations or areas of interest. Criticism of opponents accounted for 25.1% of the status analysis in this study. Political groups can more effectively tailor their rhetoric by targeting particular populations or demographics with content that aligns with their ideals and opposes or denounces opposing viewpoints. Ideology-based content of this kind is more likely to influence undecided voters or reinforce the opinions of existing supporters.

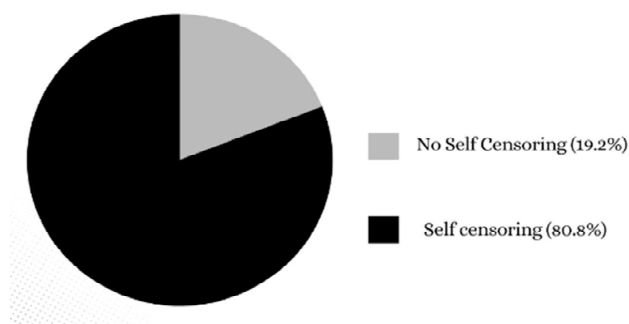
WhatsApp offers a cost-effective way for politically affiliated individuals to promote their political views or defend their opponents, especially for emerging or lesser-known candidates. By using visuals, videos, and live events, anyone

can shape their political image. These campaigns can encourage viewers to vote in their favour, discuss their politics in the public sphere, share resources, or present valid points in defence of their political position. These platforms enable viral movements, helping mobilise large groups quickly.

In the realm of communication, gatekeeping involves the curation of messages, topics or political viewpoints by media channels, political leaders and other influential figures. This practice plays a role in crafting the content that shapes public sentiment and in determining which voices or perspectives gain prominence or are pushed to the sidelines. Traditional and new media outlets act as gatekeepers in the political communication process. When it came to old-school media, reporters, editors, and media organisations themselves decided which stories were covered, how they were framed, and which sources or perspectives were included or excluded; these decisions often depended on factors such as editorial policies, commercial interests, and audience preferences. For instance, a news channel might choose to focus on a specific political conflict while not giving much prominence to other issues, shaping public perception and political discourse.

The long tail effect (Yang, 2013), individual heterogeneity (Hausman & Newey, 2016), audience segmentation (Purtle et al., 2018), media fragmentation (Riles et al., 2018), and individual legitimacy perceptions (Wang et al., 2020) are just a few of the studies that have highlighted individual differences in public communication. According to a novel theory of individual issue salience in the social media age, some social media users are particularly interested in particular concerns (McCombs et al., 2014). For this reason, social media consensus was not reflected in the conventional public agenda-setting strategy.

Figure 7: Self Censoring of Whatsapp Status

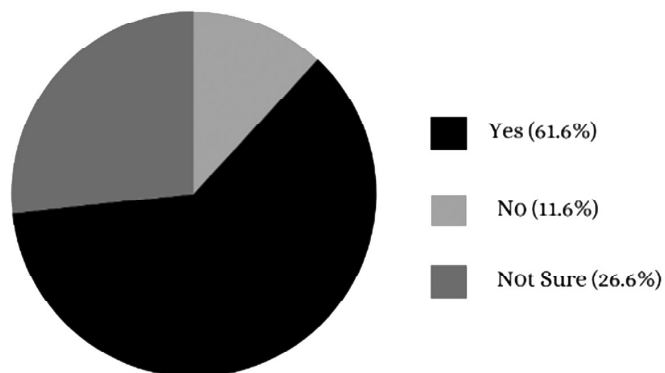


The most intriguing feature of social media platforms is the opportunity to share our thoughts and opinions with limited or no external interference. However, 97 respondents (80.8%) of this study say they always consider certain factors before posting a status on WhatsApp. Even when a particular image, video, or piece of text aligns with their political interests, they were used to hiding it from others. It may be their parents, relatives, teachers, or even friends. Also, they used to assign a specific status to only some viewers. One of the respondents says that he always hides his political status on WhatsApp from his girlfriend because she did not like his political involvement. So, in this situation, users tended to self-censor or gatekeep their content before sharing it with others. At the same time, 23 users (19.2%) responded that they did not consider anything else when posting a status, as long as it seemed to align with their political ideologies.

Cultural gatekeeping in social media political communication occurs when individuals or groups claim authority over who can claim, participate in, or understand specific political messages or engagements. For instance, someone might argue that only people with specific political and cultural experiences or backgrounds can identify with a particular political movement, genre, or social cause. People may set guidelines for what constitutes appropriate content, what subjects are 'worthy' of discussion, or who is allowed to voice their thoughts on a given subject. Users may reject someone's viewpoint on a political topic, for instance, if it does not align with their political ideology, or they may argue that 'outsiders' should not participate in certain political debates.

By deciding what content is viewed, who is exposed to it, and whose opinions are ignored, social media platforms use algorithms that can serve as a kind of gatekeeping. This kind of institutional gatekeeping can restrict access to communities or information, particularly for underrepresented groups. Gatekeeping on WhatsApp can exacerbate political divisions among users. Ideological divisions can widen when most users favour certain points of view while suppressing others. Echo chambers that strengthen political prejudices might result from exposure to mostly information that supports preexisting opinions. This selective exposure can widen social differences, hinder communication, and lead to compromise.

Figure 8: Do you think the whatsapp status influences the political decision-making people?



It has been experienced that exposure to political communication positively correlates with people's political efficacy. People's attitudes and level of active participation in a democracy are determined by their political awareness, which is their comprehension of and interest in current issues and events. Since knowledge is necessary for effective political involvement, people in a democracy should have a fundamental understanding of the political system through which they express their opinions and choose representatives. People who do not know what is going on around them will eventually stop participating in society. Therefore, the "backbone" of any democracy is an informed populace (Kumar, 2014).

Results of our study show that more than half of the respondents (65.8%) believe that political messages on WhatsApp can influence people's political decision-making. People's interest in politics, thoughts on elections, and support for political candidates and ideologies all rise when they are exposed to political communications on WhatsApp. It improves their awareness of political knowledge (Kumar, 2014). Media exposure affects people instantly rather than gradually. This sudden rise in the proportion of respondents who are aware and interested in political events, compared with those with little or no exposure to WhatsApp status, is unparalleled and significantly outweighs the impact of socio-economic characteristics.

For the first time in the history of human communication, everyone, from everywhere, at any time, has the opportunity to express their opinions to a large

number of people who have even chosen them. Social media platforms like WhatsApp make it real; it truly democratised and globalised free speech. In their daily non-political messaging with other users with whom they have (close) social contacts, people will always engage in political discussions, whether or not they do so in their physical settings (Masip et al., 2021). Political conversation on WhatsApp is distinct from that of other platforms and even from offline talk, reflecting end-to-end encryption in both form and substance.

In fact, our results indicate that, compared with participating in a physical action such as a meeting, discussion, or protest, political activism via WhatsApp with very tight linkages made participants feel more intrigued, joyful, and curious. When a person posts a status to promote a political candidate, he or she feels they have become part of that system. However, in reality, it is difficult and needs continuous efforts to be associated with that system.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of WhatsApp status as a tool for political communication among Kerala youth. The results of this study make it evident that young people have been using WhatsApp to further their political beliefs or engage in political activism. A person's intentions are obvious when they post a status update on WhatsApp. To be exposed to this status, they ought to have specific target audiences. The ideas of agenda setting and uses and gratifications governed these processes. When a person uses WhatsApp to share a particular message, they are fulfilling their political gratifications, and, intentionally or not, it forms an agenda. WhatsApp status can shape people's opinions by giving more space and attention to certain issues. If a group of people share a particular point as part of a campaign using images, videos, or text, those exposed to these messages may form an emotional connection to it, especially when it is presented by someone they are familiar with. Here, the dynamics of agenda setting have evolved, allowing for more decentralised and interactive forms of communication.

The wide variety of voices constitutes a form of democratisation and can influence which topics gain attention. The salience of a topic of discussion may be reflected in people's comprehension and in their interactions with one another. However, as a summary of personal perspectives, the public agenda overlooks individual

variances, which are emphasised on social media. Individual differences and close relationships result in a wide range of public concerns, with some very active people becoming influential opinion leaders (Veijalainen et al., 2015). The endorsements, posts, and shared opinions of these people may get significant visibility, and they are crucial in defining social media agendas. WhatsApp can promote interaction and create enduring trust when the focus stays on political communication. Finding the ideal balance between pertinent content and content that is neither overly personal nor forced is crucial in this situation. Users need to feel as though they can voice their concerns and that they will be taken seriously.

When other variables are taken into account, this data shows no significant behavioural repercussions for interpersonal political communication through WhatsApp. They would have a favourable effect on users' political interest and behaviour. However, respondents were less inclined, for instance, to seek more information because they did not have to refute opposing views to support their own claims (Lyons et al., 2016). Also, they might not have the extra means to encourage others to participate in political activism.

According to Valenzuela et al. (2019), users with a political rationale may nevertheless disseminate false information to support their own opinions. However, in this post-truth era, political knowledge alone cannot prevent the propagation of false information. Future research should examine in greater detail whether and how political discourse on WhatsApp and other instant messaging apps enhances citizens' capacity to recognise false and misleading information (Vermeer et al., 2020). Also, political polarisation on social media apps like WhatsApp might limit the diversity of political information and political activism to which users are exposed. It raises concerns about the democratic benefit of communication through these platforms. It would then be important to study the content-specific features of political information shared on WhatsApp to gain a comprehensive understanding.

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